1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

CHAPTER VI

MATING AND MARRIAGE

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THERE are two ways in which a Haitian family may be formed. The first of these is through a marriage having the sanction of the Church, in token of which a ring is thereafter worn by the wife. The second mode of establishing a family is by means of the institution known as *plaçage*, wherein a man and a woman who desire to live together fulfill certain obligations and perform certain ceremonies at the home of the girl's parents, after which the new household is established.[1] The distinction between the two forms has been mentioned, though not analyzed, by several of those who traveled in the island after the period of slavery. Thus, according to Mackenzie:

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> "Marriage formally solemnised is not so common as unions of another kind. . . . In the North the practice of solemnising marriages is said to be more common than in the South, owing to the preceding practice under Christophe, and the exertions of the priesthood at the Cape."[2]

Similarly, St. John speaks of not noticing "any particular ceremonies" at marriages:

> ". . . some are striving to imitate the upper classes, and have the ceremony performed in church, but the mass of the people are still not regularly married."[3]

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so that both forms must be considered by one interested in social institutions as constituting true marriage. The prestige which is derived from a Church union, however, is of appreciable significance; sufficient, indeed, to motivate weddings at which the children and even grandchildren of the principals act as attendants. A man and woman may live together as *placées* ten or fifteen years or more before they have amassed the necessary amount to pay for a legal marriage. It is only when parents of young people are prosperous enough to pay for a Church marriage that their union receives the stamp of approval of the Church, for the Church wedding involves considerable expenditure in terms of Haitian peasant economy. A "first class" wedding, for example, calls for the payment of 47.50 gourdes; a "second class" ceremony, 40 gourdes; and the least expensive, or "third class" rite costs 34 to 36 gourdes, while in addition to this, five gourdes must be paid the assistant who rings the church bells, and a fixed fee of 25 gourdes is assessed for the civil registration of the marriage. The wedding ring is, of course, indispensable; a modest one, of gold, costs 60 gourdes. Food and drinks served at the festivities following the Church service cost, conservatively, another fifty gourdes, while if an ox is slaughtered to provide a more elaborate feast, the amount is correspondingly greater. Finally, the person who reads the necessary prayers before the festivities begin and the musicians who play for the *bal* must also be compensated. It can readily be seen, therefore, how a man and woman may live together in a *placée* union for years before their resources permit a legal marriage.

Whatever the type of mating, the first steps toward betrothal are taken by the young man. Though he has courted the girl of his choice and his proposal is acceptable to her, customary procedure demands that she refer him to her parents, whereupon his parents appear before those of the girl to make their plea on his behalf. If both families reside

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584 831 836 truth, but the matter is recognized as one which concerns only her husband and herself, and if he is willing to keep her, it is his own affair. Consensus of opinion in Mirebalais 836 369 is that the percentage of girls who do not have pre-marital sexual relations is relatively small, but the belief is expressed that chastity is more prevalent among country women than among those of the town, where, in turn, it is more frequent than in larger centers such as Port-au-Prince. Even though 836 848 pre-marital relations are commonplace, however, the pregnancy of an unmarried girl is regarded as both reprehensible and unfortunate, and she is severely beaten for it by her family. In such cases, if the father of the unborn child will take the girl, his parents are sent to bring her, but where the parents of the man refuse to ask for the girl because they do not approve of her, then, if he still desires her, he must himself face the anger of her parents. Should he not wish to come for her, she may either remain with her family or seek work in another community. In any event, her child will be well cared for by her family, and no reproach will attach to it because of the circumstances of its birth.

585 782 796 Before a mating of any type is consummated, the familial spirits must be notified of the approaching event so that they may be well disposed toward it, for no union where this is neglected can enjoy happiness or peace. One Mirebalais woman was pointed out as an object lesson of the necessity of doing this. Though a devotee of several gods, neither she nor her husband was willing to perform the necessary rites for [753] [828] her gods before their marriage. She was suffering from an acute case of melancholia after the birth of her first child, and the prevailing opinion was that she was going mad because of the neglect of her duty toward her deities. Shortly before a woman goes to her husband, therefore, a *couvert sec* for the Rada deities is given both by herself and by her betrothed. If the family of either the young man or the woman possess deities of the powerful Pétro group, more inclusive offerings

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are necessary, and the elders of the family must see to it that these gods are instructed not to trouble the newly married pair. If either or both of them are devotees of deities such as Damballa, Erzilie, Ogun, or Aida Wedo, all of whom are known to be extremely jealous, these gods must be specially placated.

For the actual ceremony the couple appear each with a candle in hand, pour water on the ground in the family house of worship, and kneel and pray. The god may "come to the head" of the girl or the man or some relative of each and advise them. If it asks a gift at this time, it is either given at the moment or a promise is made to fulfill the request later. If the spirit objects to the marriage, it is wooed with offerings. Thus, for example, should the young woman be possessed by the serpent-god Damballa, who, speaking through his devotee, registered an objection to the marriage, the girl would be given such gifts as a white silk dress, white silk stockings, or some other valued object in the sacred color of the god, or some perfume which might also serve to mollify him. Or should the man's deity who registered objection be Ogun, the god of war, a fine red kerchief might be offered in honor of this god, whose color is red.[822]

The dead of both families are also notified by means of a visit to the cemetery. The days for these pilgrimages are Mondays or Fridays, and the pilgrimages must be made during either the morning or the early afternoon, since visits at night are only for evil purposes. As candles are lighted, announcement is made to the family dead of the marriage which is soon to take place, and their good offices are asked to bring it happiness. After all the family dead have been invoked, a candle is lighted before the large cross for Baron Samedi, and another behind it for Gede, the first as the ruler of cemeteries and the graves of the dead, and the second as his handy-man. Another candle is lighted for the "abandoned souls" of the family, who have died without consecration, and yet another

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585 769 782 for the victims of smallpox. If family traditions also tell of those shot, not in war, but as prisoners, perhaps, a candle is lighted for them outside the cemetery wall. Though the couple may perform this ceremony together, each makes this request of the dead of his or her own family as the candles are lighted. This call on the dead is repeated several days after the marriage or later, when candles are again lighted.

591 583 585 769 The sole exception to the performance of these rites before the new household is begun occurs in those cases of *plaçage* where a girl continues to live at her own home. This is rare, however, for the house of a man is usually built near that of his father, and he takes his wife there. But if special circumstances dictate otherwise, the ceremony of notifying and pacifying the family deities may be deferred, though a man must eventually present every woman with whom he lives to his family gods and in turn must be presented to the gods of the woman's family. In similar fashion the dead of both families must be adequately notified.

585 [997] [796] Marriages rarely take place in the months of November and December, the former being disliked because it is "the month of the dead," during which All Saints' Day occurs, and the latter because it ends the year. Except for the Church [583] wedding and less elaborate festivities to celebrate the event, the rites which mark a *plaçage* mating do not greatly differ from those which mark a legal marriage, which may be described in outline. The favorite day for Church marriages is [777] Saturday, "the day of the Virgin," and the time for the ceremony is always early morning, before the heat of the day has set in. If the home of the girl is some distance from Mirebalais, the party come to town the preceding day, the girl spending the night with some friend. Otherwise the bridegroom, accompanied by his relatives and friends, goes to the house of the girl early Saturday morning. Before the couple leave the [782] home of her parents, water must be thrown on the ground in [789] front of them, and also sprinkled by them before the en-

1: Herskovits E-4, 8 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
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trance of the house — three times if there is one door (for the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost), three times before each door if there are two entrances, and once before each door if there are three. The wedding procession goes to church on foot. The men, if they are from the countryside, are stiff, uncomfortable, and hot in their unaccustomed "best" clothing and their often painful shoes, while the women are also self-conscious in their new dresses. The elaborateness of the ceremony varies with the fee paid the priest, but at all events the clanging church bell is heard notifying the town and its environs that a marriage is being consecrated.

If the family of the bride or groom are well known in Mirebalais, a wedding reception may be given at their house for friends of the couple and of their parents, but the real festivities are held after the return to the new family home. As the procession approaches it, the "bush-priest," a functionary who, because of his knowledge of French, can read the prayers of the Church, waits at the gate with two aides, small boys or girls, each with a flag, one red and one white. He has sacred water in one hand and a lighted candle in the other, and as he pours this water on the ground three times he intones the Pater Noster, the Ave Maria, the Credo, and other prayers. These concluded, hymns are sung by all the participants, and singing, a procession is formed with the "bush-priest" in the lead, followed by the flag-bearers, the couple who have just been married, arm in arm, the "godfather" and "godmother" of the marriage, as the witnesses are called, the parents of the bride and groom, and other close relatives. As the procession reaches the door of the house, it pauses and water is thrown on the ground three times; the circuit of the house is made twice again, and each time, as the door is reached, water is thrown, until, the third tour completed, the participants solemnly enter.

There coffee, liqueurs, wine, *kola*, and cakes are served to the principals and the more important members of the com-

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585 munity. All others stay under the brush shelter which has been erected at the side of the house, where men are served the common drink of the Haitian peasant, *clairin*, raw rum. The feast, furnished by the bridegroom, includes beef, pork, and many fowls. "We do not eat badly at a wedding!" is the comment of Haitians. At the weddings of more prosperous folk there may be dancing, but no *vodun* dances are danced. "This is not a thing of *vodun*, but of the Church," is the explanation proffered.

The feasting begun, the bridal couple must submit to much speech-making. Long "lessons in morality" are pronounced by grandfathers, godfathers, and elderly male friends; in fact, anyone moved to speak expounds upon "the road to follow" for the good, the worthy life, and many a warning is given with moving examples of the fate of those who disregarded the counsel given them. The food and drinks consumed, the speech-makers silenced, and the dancers tired, the wedding guests begin to take leave, until by sundown many are gone, and soon the young couple find themselves alone.

175 595 569 That plural marriage has existed in Haiti since the time of independence is evident from the available accounts. Little can be learned of slave matings prior to 1804, but it may be assumed that these were in the main temporary and existed at the will of the masters; and while the practice of polygyny among the slaves must have been difficult, if only because of the greater proportion of males, the African pattern seems *to have had enough vitality to bring about the re-establish*ment of the institution as soon as slavery was abolished. Thus, writing in 1830, Makenzie notes a man "not inaptly named 'Taureau'" who "though his means were small, and his cottage still smaller . . . had a harem of no less than six wives."[9] St. John, some fifty years later, also remarks on the fact that

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"In the interior, a well-to-do black lives openly with several women as wives, and I have seen the patriarch

2: Courlander B-5 (1937-1955) 1960 S73 Haiti SV3
[P 112-BB]
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39. *A wedding scene near Plaisance.*

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40. *Saturday night hombochc.*

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
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themselves and their families economically and socially. Property was important, so they took pains to insure the legitimacy of their heirs; color was crucial, and so they regulated the marriages of their children to be sure there was no reversion to the black strain. They guarded their fortunes solicitously, provided their daughters with dowries large enough sometimes even to lure a white husband, educated their sons in Paris—behaved, in short, as if they had been pillars of society in provincial France. Like the white planters, the male affranchis often had relations with slave women, but even more rarely than whites were they seduced into marriage with women of the lower orders.

When the slave insurrection and its aftermath freed the half-million blacks in Saint-Domingue it was not to be expected that European middle-class morals and practices should suddenly prevail. Modern usage emerges from the womb of tradition. Neither in Africa nor in the colony had tradition taught the blacks respect for monogamy or for marriage entered into by religious ceremony. If the ex-slaves had reverted to their Dahomean, Congolese, or other African background, they might have introduced the bride price; but to pay a bride price is to assume the existence of wealth, an assumption contrary to fact among the ex-slaves in Saint-Domingue of the 1790's, and Haiti of the 1800's. In neither Dahomey nor the Congo was there much ceremony at the union of a couple; what there was consisted mostly of singing and dancing. If, on the other hand, the people went only by what they had observed in slave days, there was no tradition of binding union or strict codes, as we understand them. A man knew when to stay away from another man's woman; children remained near their mother—these two statements almost cover the situation as of 1796 among the newly freed slaves.

Toussaint, apparently a conventional person in what concerned social behavior, wished his people to be "moral." He instituted a time of "holy masses, mystic communions, biblical psalms, and divine oraisons"[1] for his private edification, and recommended the same for his people. He could not possibly have instilled into them a desire for Christian marriage, however; even if he could, priests would not have been available for the wholesale marrying of scores of thousands of men and women. Local records of weddings at this period are very scanty.

1. Saint-Rémy, *Pétion et Haïti*, III, 93.

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
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it seems not radically to have affected the masses but only the fairly well-to-do.

The *Royal Almanac* for the year 1814 touches proudly upon the moral state of the kingdom. The author of the almanac, the Comte de la Limonade, says: "Great attention is paid to morals and manners. Marriage is honored, protected, and encouraged; no Haitian who is unmarried can fill any place of distinction. Divorce is not permitted." All this was true; yet the mass of Haitians still remained unmarried. Nevertheless, the quotation indicates the extent to which Christophe had gone in his effort to reform marriage and morals among his people; to set them in the European tradition and draw them out of their African and colonial backgrounds.

While Christophe was trying to effect reforms in the North, Pétion was accepting his Southern folk as they were. Hardly a law during his twelve-year administration touches the subject of marriage. The élite colored people continued to make proper legal marriages and so insure the inheritance of their legitimate children. The common folk lived their family lives without weddings, and if property questions arose, custom ruled, backed by public opinion in their little communities.

Such are the backgrounds out of which modern Haitian sex relations have developed. From African tradition came family life, the importance of property to stabilize a union, insignificance of a wedding ceremony, familiarity with matrilineal kinship and descent; from French colonial practice, formal marriage to establish a family with social ambition, casual sex relations for pleasure outside this marriage, the claim of legitimate children to all property (in contrast to folk custom, where few legitimate children were born); from Dessalines, an emphasis upon the African tradition and realism; from Christophe, an insistence upon strict French practice in marriage and in the passage of property.

From among these alternatives Haiti made a choice which is an excellent example of what Keller calls "automatic selection in the mores."[1] There was no congress to select one procedure rather than another. Because Pétion and Boyer followed a *laissez-faire* policy in social matters, the people took the path of least resistance.

1. A. G. Keller, *Societal Evolution* (revised ed., New York, 1931), chaps. IV and V.

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
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175 581 588 643 Englishman, Sir Spenser St. John, said that he had met placées of the President at dinner, and was asked to trace resemblances between children and their reported father. "No one seeks to conceal it, and the conversation of married ladies continually turns on this subject. One excuse for it is that many of the ladies whom you meet in society were only married after the birth of their first children. However, according to French law, that ceremony renders them all legitimate. Some of those admitted into society are not married at all, but their daughters being married, prevents notice being taken of the false position of the mother."[5]

565 581 In recent years the élite, although many continue to contract plaçage unions, keep these arrangements quieter than formerly and tend to make them with women lower in the social scale than themselves. Formal and regular marriage is expected and approved among the upper classes of today. Indeed, one modern informant in answer to the question, "What is the primary test of membership among the élites?" replied without hesitation, "Five generations of marriage in the family."[6]

583 565 Formal marriage is not entered into lightly among the upper classes. It is a serious business watched over by state, family, and church. The interest of the state seems to be to guard against bigamy. The possibility of bigamy is the more likely since one or the other contracting party may have formerly lived in plaçage. The interest of the family is in the wisdom of the alliance. Before a wedding can be performed both parties must have obtained the formal consent of their parents, besides having their banns published at their respective places of permanent residence. There seems to be some doubt whether the courts would uphold a father in his refusal to consent to the marriage of a son over twenty-one years old; but cases are known in which such a refusal has stopped the wedding. Of course, the daughters must always obtain parental consent to marry.

● 585 The civil wedding, adopted in Haiti at the beginning of her independence, is usually followed by a religious ceremony. The Church, like the State, takes precautions against clandestine marriages and bigamy. Notice of a projected union must be read from the pulpit

5. *Hayti, or the Black Republic*, I, 177–178.

[114] 581 554 6. John Lobb, in "Caste and Class in Haiti" (*American Journal of Sociology*, XLVI, No. 1 [July, 1940], 29), states that "one informant defined family status as a problem resulting from the recognition that in a family the parents had, for generations, been legally married in the church."

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
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of the parish church to which each party belongs, and no ceremony may be performed by a priest without the presentation of the certificate of the civil marriage.

According to the legal code, as well as actual practice of the upper classes, woman is man's definite inferior in rights.[2] The Haitian code follows closely that of Napoleon, and both conform in general to practice common among substantial people in the Haiti and France of the early nineteenth century. Spouses equally owe to each other fidelity, succor, and assistance; the husband owes protection to his wife, the wife obedience to her husband. Although the wife must live with her husband wherever he chooses, he conversely must receive her when she comes to live with him, and must provide food for her. No wife may purchase, sell, give, or otherwise alienate property without the consent of her husband; moreover, the husband alone has the administration of goods coming in the dowery, so long as the union endures.

The modern movement for women's rights has hardly touched Haiti.[3] Women may not vote, nor may they hold public office. Among the élite, in theory and in practice woman's place is in the home, caring for the household and the children. One might imagine himself in provincial France as he sees the daily life of upper-class Haitian women: the ordering of meals, directing of servants, sewing, shopping, visiting, party going, occasional novel reading, driving in the family car. Different from French practice, however, is the taboo against most manual labor: this is the task of servants only. The élite housewife may cook but not sweep, sew but not launder, bargain with a huckster but not carry home her purchases. A woman of the upper classes would demean herself to enter business. Since the American Occupation, as a matter of fact, a few women have been daring enough to become secretaries and stenographers, but there seems to be nothing like a concerted movement for the "emancipation" of élite women. There are schools for girls, but these do not reach as far as the schools for boys; women are not admitted to the law school or medical school, for a woman lawyer or doctor would be unthinkable in Haitian society.

2. See Louis Borno, *Code civil d'Haïti annoté* (Port-au-Prince, 1921), chap. VI, articles 196–221.

3. See, however, Madeleine G. Sylvain, "The Feminist Movement in Haiti," *Bulletin of the Pan-American Union*, LXXIII, No. 6 (June, 1939), 323–331.

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
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spouses. In the hills more than one peasant house was surrounded, as it would have been in Dahomey, by huts in each of which lived a "wife" of the farmer. Matters are not very different nowadays, except that men have learned the wisdom of not having their women live too close to each other.

From the guesses of experienced observers, it is probably not far wide of the mark to estimate that only one couple out of a hundred is married according to the approved mode of the Western World.

The State apparently does not care; or, to put it another way, government officials know how impossible it would be to alter a custom confirmed by long usage; one which, moreover, works well enough, since it causes practically no violence or legal cases for the State to attend to. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, is eager to persuade the people to observe the sacrament of holy matrimony. The priests have assiduously endeavored to explore the peasant mind in order to learn what deters the average person from formal marriage. The reasons for the indifference to weddings might be listed as follows:

1. Inertia. There is no convincing reason to vary time-honored practice which works well enough, particularly since a wedding is likely to cause a great disturbance of daily routine and even a measure of jealousy on the part of those who have not made the display.

2. Suspicion of legal documents and civil officials. People who put their names (or marks) on documents and who call the attention of governmental officials to themselves are almost sure to rue the day. A man knows what can be demanded of him by custom in his informal unions; but who can say what the law would hold him responsible for?

3. Expense. The civil license costs; the priest and his assistants must be paid; to be married in church, one should wear shoes; if one wears shoes, one should dress up to them; a church wedding calls for a feast. At least two days must be spent away from work if the proper formalities are carried out.

4. Common sense in an inevitable situation. Both State and Church would try to limit a man to one wife; prosperity might demand two or more. Is it sensible to discriminate against a second woman, who might be just as much help to a man as his legal wife?

The Church through its priests works unceasingly to answer these arguments, but without notable success. Inertia is hard to overcome;